River's Eleven

A trivia heist about Friend of the Family. Not starring George Clooney.

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It's been three-ish months since the release of *The Diary of River Song: Friend of the Family,* and if THAT isn't cause for celebration, I don't know what is. Hey, I'm the k of guy who'll have a cake to celebrate a Thursday, just roll with it.

This is an audio that's had some tremendously kind and thoughtful responses from listeners and I've been asked lots and lots of delightful questions about it. Therefor

as a TREAT… here are eleven trivial points about the writing of. Look, I'd probably prefer a cake as well, but we can't have everything.

Friend of the Family is a four-hour mini-series/fractured period drama/epic which se Alex Kingston as Professor River Song hopping around multiple generations of the Mortimer family. If you haven't heard it already, **stop reading now**. These tidbits ar **spoilerific**. Instead, go and find yourself a copy. Yes, right now. I'm very proud of w the cast and crew did with this release. They elevated what could've been a very tangled story and made it wonderful.

So, if you've listened to it…

…and maybe re-listened to it…

…and you're mildly intrigued at a peek behind the scribbling curtain…

…here are some Minor Facts about my biggest Big Finish to date!

1. *Friend of the Family* is set over lots of different time periods. The original years was going to zoom in on were 1936, 1959, 1985, 1997. For some reason I was goi to frame it more around what was on telly at the time - *Quatermass* for the 50s a *Eastenders* for the 80s for example, that's what I have in my notes. (I had a stron visual image of River sitting down and watching telly, because that felt like an antithesis to all her usual hopping around. This is one of the reasons she binge watches *Pride and Prejudice*.) At this point I hadn't decided that the periods wou be evenly-spaced, and I was debating whether to ditch the 1930s altogether and make it 2019 instead. When I realised I wanted to end with a big ole gay weddi I landed on 2014 - the year gay marriage became legal in the UK - and worked back from there. I was dessssssperately trying to avoid 1963, because it seems li lots of Whoniverse stories explore that period for some reason… but I found my characters spilling into that year regardless. Hence the Stevie Wonder joke.
2. I was permitted five guest characters per time period. (We decided to record 'pe

era' as opposed to 'per disc', which is how we'd normally do things - allowing us dice and slice the casts throughout. Not literally.) Knowing I wanted Ivy as a sidekick, this reduced me to four. Knowing Cook would rock up in most times a well, that reduced me even further to three! But I decided to start and end with two couples, so that allowed me to squeeze in an extra character into the 1980s. Hopefully the periods don't feel too claustrophobic. I think the off-stage characters help negate this - including a Mr Finnemore, named after John Finnemore who inspired this format with his *Souvenir Programme* and is one of radio greats. (If you have not heard *Cabin Pressure*... forget my River Song, go do that now instead.)

3. '*Learn the rules of the house / Find the key to the door / Save the bird from the nest / D the isle on the shore*.' That's the Mortimer legacy. But did you know (you didn't) there was originally a coda to it? '*When these four rites are done / The walls will fal and the River shall run.*' I think I got rid of it to make it less obviously about Rive Also - just sounds a wee bit wonky to me.
4. I love big old houses. I like how I'm drawn to them as historic homes and repul by them as monuments of status and wealth. This one wasn't based on any building in particular, though I think its location - by the sea - was inspired by End House from Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House*. The family name was the inspired by the location - 'Mortimer', containing *mort* for death and *mer* for sea. thought that apt, the two constants for this family. It was neeeearly Pearson, as nod to *This Is Us*, another strong influence on the story - and one of producer David Richardson's favourite shows. In the end, he became a professor at Luna University.
5. I get asked a lot if it was tricky to write, and I'm embarrassed to admit that it wasn't. I was lucky to land on a strong structure right from the start, so the actu scribbling process was very enjoyable. I wrote the first drafts in six weeks over Christmas 2021. I'm a true believer in discovering stuff in the writing process, l the only major thing that popped up for me was the subplot of River's

professorship. This hadn't been in my treatment whatsoever. It suddenly felt natural and thematic that Ivy had another agenda, that she was sussing out Riv to join the Luna University 'family'. After checking this was okay/hadn't been d already, I was told to speak to Matt Fitton, King of the Big Finish River timelin to see if it would work. He advised me that it could - but that River had also probably used the title of Professor before she'd really been given it. That work nicely with the tangle of paradoxes this story was gathering...

6. Despite naming them after lines of the Mortimer legacy, I wanted to avoid cha breaks altogether, but my wonderful script editor John Dorney wisely advised n that not everyone has the chance to binge all four hours at once (what do you mean, you have LIVES). Therefore, we needed a kind of recap at the start of eac chapter. Harry as the 'Old Man' narrating the bedtime story was already in draf one, appearing at the beginning and the end of the four hours, so he seemed lik the ideal candidate to now guide the listener through each new hour. I'm grate for this suggestion (as I always am for Dorney's ideas, frankly) because it was in these sections that I stumbled on the 'a house can tell two stories - a ghost stor and a love story' sentiment, which summed up what I was trying to say in the piece. It especially felt like something George Mortimer would say. This then g worked more into the narrative.
7. This is my fourth collab with Wendy Craig, who played 'Older Maddie' in the script. I love her. If I haven't miscounted - there's a fifth and final audio of min that she'll be in - though that won't be released for a while yet. (And that upcoming fifth audio... has genuinely changed what I want to do with my life. Wow, big claim. Shame I can't talk about it yet.)
8. Talking of which - one of Craig's past roles for Big Finish was my Ninth Docto story *Auld Lang Syne* and, in response to the question I'm most asked, yes this is ABSOLUTELY inspired by that! It's not a sequel, it's not an upgrade, and I swe it's not me being lazy - but it strikes at the heart of a key philosophy of mine. I to treat my Big Finish audios as a laboratory of fiction. I get to attempt fun wei

stuff… and I get to attempt it again under different conditions. There was a podcast that struck a chord with me a long long time ago - an episode of Malco Gladwell's Revisionist History called 'Hallelujah'. It looked at musicians return to certain songs and rerecording them and finding new layers and meanings an strengths within them. In truth, I'm a very inconsistent writer. I'm lucky that I forever find joy in the process but my output can be as wonky as heck. Yet writ is rewriting. You don't get 'one shot' at it, you get to take that pressure off yourself, you get as many goes you like! Let yourself have a second, third, fourth try at things. And if I want to do a different take on 'house riddled through tim again, I damn well will.

9. There was a post-credits scene that I deleted very late in the day. Switzerland, 1963: we visited George Mortimer in the hotel bar and someone sends a drink over. He then spots a young male couple both wearing his suits - implied to be Harry and Vinay. This deletion was a tricky decision - I love George, I thought could be sweet, I wanted to give him a final beat… but ultimately it didn't feel right. If Harry and Vinay ever did pop back to visit George (and I'd like to belie they would've done, on one of their honeymoons with River), that's worthy of a whole story, not a throwaway beat. And I just couldn't get the tone right - this i probably days before his death, I didn't know how he'd respond, it all felt too… well, glib. It still feels to me that George's journey does not have a final beat - it cut short, much like his life. And I can live with that. Form sadly reflecting content.
10. Something else I considered and removed… a cameo from 11 at the very end. Whaaaaat? I thought he might rock up on River's arm as she takes the boys for their latest honeymoon. Cute, right? But nah, I quickly shelved it. River's often the shadow of her husband. The Mortimers are her family beyond him.
11. And finally… there is a line in the story that… well, there's no other way to put t it's a MISTAKE. It's wrong! And it curdled my blood when I first heard it. How could I be so foolish, letting that one get past! Worse yet, it's the kind of error t

> gets the creative juices flowing - it makes me want to write a whole four episod more to explore the ramifications of what it implies. *Friend of the Family II: 2 Family 2 Furious.* (I jest, I'm incapable of doing sequels justice). What is this mistake, I hear you ask? I'm obviously not going to tell you. And don't go looki for it! That way darkness lies...

So there we have it. A self-indulgent ride through one of my favourite audios to dat Heck, I could do eleven more points, it's hard not to write a story this chonky and fa down inside its gravity wells. I feel lucky to have been approached for the gig, and I delighted that writer-led box-sets are becoming a 'thing'. They want to do more, so please support them, either through buying the sets or telling your friends or writir lovely things to the podcast. It's just a great scale of canvas for some deep dives and different approaches. I'm really looking forward to some of my favourite writers having a bash.

Annnnnnnd really this was all a ploy to make myself do another Substack. Will I do another? Who knows. But share and sign up anyway. I can send you all pictures of Thursday's cake.

[The Diary of River Song: Friend of the Family is available HERE]

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